

Allan King's notes on Warrendale
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[Filmmaker's Notes](#)

WARRENDALE, the film

Let me distinguish between the film and the place. Both proved to be life-changing ventures for me. The film brought together all that I had learned about the craft of filmmaking and from my exploration of issues which had perplexed me for much of my life until then. In particular, the film was the outcome of my wish to explore childhood and its effect on people's lives as adults. That wish, in turn, arose from a determination to resolve personal problems that still afflicted me at the age of thirty-five (and for some years after that).

As an adult who was in some ways emotionally immobilized, I was drawn to the idea of filming children in a setting where they could behave freely. I was working and living in England at the time, and visited Blackheath, a progressive school in which children were given a large measure of freedom to follow their impulses. I decided I wanted to make a film there.

Patrick Watson, who was then an executive producer of the CBC series Document, responded to the idea warmly, but he insisted that the program be shot in Canada. When I argued that there were no schools like Blackheath or the more famous Summerhill in Canada, he referred me to Warrendale, an innovative and controversial treatment centre for emotionally disturbed children. My objection that I wanted to film normal, not "disturbed," children did not sway him. After a six-month stalemate, I woke up in the middle of the night, sat straight up in bed and asked myself, "What have I got against disturbed children?" On reflection it became clear that my objections to emotionally disturbed children and Warrendale were worth looking at.

I arranged a visit, flew back to Canada in December of 1965 and met with John Brown, who had devised the treatment program and ran the centre. Brown invited me to visit his two campuses – one in Oak Ridges, north of Toronto, and the other in Rexdale, a new suburb on the outskirts of the city. I did, and was dumbfounded.

There were about twenty-five children in each location. Their behaviour was dramatic and diverse. Children were wild, shouting, quiet, withdrawn, funny, angry, explosive or

subdued – as broad a range of feeling as one could imagine. Some teenagers drank milk from baby bottles. Their treatment was equally dramatic. If they wished, they were rocked in the laps of staff. When a child's behaviour became unmanageably violent, he or she was locked in an immobilizing hold. This often provoked rage – shouting, swearing and screaming – then tears. And then calm. Dramatic? It was spellbinding. I knew this was where we would film. Patrick was delighted, a contract was drawn up and I returned again to Canada in early January to prepare and make the film.

I determined quite quickly to film at Rexdale, a new housing development, rather than Oak Ridges, a mansion that had belonged to the Eatons, Canada's pre-eminent merchant family. Rexdale was emblematic of the extraordinary changes in social and family life as I had known them through the Depression, World War II and the immigration and economic boom that followed. I spent three weeks visiting the four houses in the Warrendale cul-de-sac, gradually settling on Houses One and Two, and then on the latter.

At that point my colleagues, Bill Brayne and Russ Heise, joined me. They spent a week setting up lights around the house – not many, just enough so that we could film at any time of day or night, and rigging them so that they could be turned on with the flick of a switch. The children followed them around as they worked; they were allowed to handle the equipment and get comfortable with it and us. The staff, too, were part of the process. There were six staff members for twelve children in each house, and also a housekeeper and a cook.

From the outset John Brown was keen that the film be made. Public ignorance of disturbed children was a huge impediment to treatment and, even more important, damaging to the children. However, from the outset, he made clear that it was fundamental that we have the agreement of the children and staff. The staff were extraordinarily helpful, but also careful and cautious. They were not comfortable with the prospect of being in the camera's eye – under inspection as they worked, as it were – and they were concerned, too, about how filming would affect the children and their treatment.

So, after we had worked through our choice of houses, had finished rigging lights, getting to know the children and letting them get to know us, it came time to face our judges: the children.

As was the custom at Warrendale, a meeting was held to talk the issues through. I explained to the children that I thought it was important that society should have a better understanding of them, their lives, their problems and how they were working at them. I spoke of my own initial reservations. I had wanted to film normal, not disturbed children. I told them that I had woken up to the fact that I knew nothing about disturbed children. What disturbed them? What was the difference between them and “normal” children? Was there any real difference at all? This was exactly what they wanted to hear. As one put it eloquently, and all concurred, “When they put our pictures in the newspapers, they always black out our faces so we can't be seen.

“What's so awful about us that we can't be seen?” And that was exactly the question that I, too, wanted to ask. We had a deal. In my experience, precise agreement between filmmakers and their subjects is both fundamental and essential to the process. The agreement governs everything that follows.

Further, we explained that we wanted to film for a period of between five and seven weeks, pretty much day and night, without restrictions of any kind. We would not film them in the bathrooms or toilets, except perhaps if they were brushing their teeth, but that was the only limit that we felt we could accept if we were to do our work. They agreed. We began filming.

After a couple of days, one of the children said he didn't like what he had said the day before and didn't want us to use the material. I called a meeting and reminded the children of our agreement. I said I would destroy that roll of film, but if it happened again we would have to stop filming and find another place to work. If agreements cannot be kept, there is no basis for trust. Mutual trust is essential if important feelings are to be expressed. They agreed and we proceeded without issues thereafter.

Five days into filming, Dorothy, the house cook, died unexpectedly on her day off. The announcement of her death triggered outbursts of rage, grief, sorrow, and denial that expressed the children's feelings with stunning power. They were as eloquent in their grief as they were in their wit, humour and play in the film as a whole. So, by happenstance but not quite chance, the film came to speak exactly of the trauma of life that I wished to explore from the outset but had so little understanding of then. It was a remarkable gift, for which I have been profoundly grateful ever since – to John Brown, without whose discoveries and support the film could never have been made; to my

associates for their insight, tenacity and sensitivity; to the staff for their generosity and forbearance – and to the children, who expressed the heart of the matter.

WARRENDALE, the treatment centre

One and perhaps the only regret I had about the film was that there was no opportunity in it to address directly the philosophy of treatment developed by John Brown and put into practice at Warrendale and its successor, Browndale.

I wrote an extensive narration attempting to address this. Patrick recorded it and then we tried to match it to the action of the film. It simply did not work and no matter how much I rewrote or trimmed the text, it always felt intrusive and irrelevant, which of course it was: it told another story. We agreed that it did not work and cut it. The same fate befell a splendid musical score written and recorded by my friend, the brilliant English composer, Cornelius Cardew. (As I could not afford at the time of completion of the film to correct the end credits, Patrick continues to be credited with reading the unheard narration.)

John Brown was the most remarkable man that I ever met in my life. Don Davis described John well in the email he sent to John's friends and colleagues in 2004

I am sorry to inform you that John L. Brown passed away Wednesday, October 20th. Debby and John were at their daughter Kari's home in Newfoundland. John had not been well for sometime. He turned 82 in August. Each of us will have their own thoughts, feelings and memories of John. I know he played an important part in my life and the way I worked with children and staff through the knowledge I gained from him. Child care in Ontario changed when John came on the scene. He revolutionized child care. He believed strongly in the family and, if at all possible, wanted each child to be returned to their families. He believed that no parent wanted to be a bad parent. He felt that if the parents could be given to, then they in turn could give that much more to their children. It didn't always work but everyone became stronger for trying. He leaves an amazing legacy through the staff and children and their children and on and on. Our thoughts are with Debby and children and grandchildren. Much earlier

Bob Henry, another colleague and protégé said, "John had more free energy than anyone I ever met in my life." He was a committed revolutionary of great nerve and courage. John read widely in the literature of socio- and psychodynamics and spent years working directly with children in developing his ideas on how best to serve them. A man

who rarely used irony or sarcasm, he was scathing about people who asked him, “Please could you tell us something about the ‘techniques’ you use in working with children?” As if child care were a matter of “technique” or an afternoon chat.

John deserves a book. I can touch on only a few things here.

He was born in Minnesota of Norwegian background and studied at the University of British Columbia just after World War II (the same time I was there, but although I heard him talk eloquently at political meetings, we did not meet.) He moved to Ontario in 1949 and was hired by the Board of the Saint Faith’s Lodge for Wayward Girls in Newmarket with his first wife, Elizabeth Frost, who died in 1957.

He also continued studies at the University of Chicago, earning a master of arts from the School of Social Administration. A fellow student there was Debby Brown, whom he later married and who joined him in further developing his program. Particularly important at Warrendale was the concept of the Professional Resource Bank of which Debby was the director. Professional consultants’ information and special knowledge were used in treatment planning. However John and Debby did not permit professional people, who only saw children a few times, to make life or even treatment decisions, about them. As much as possible, decisions were made in discussions with all staff and the children concerned.

John’s insight into children was, quite simply, brilliant. I have met no one before or since who could so accurately tune in to what a child was feeling. When he entered a room, children immediately flocked to him. Perhaps it was because he was so totally accepting of them, so ready to talk with them not about where they “ought to be” or “might be” but about where they were right at the moment, and then to explore their feelings from there, with the child seemingly leading the way.

First and perhaps foremost, he held that if one focused on pathology, one fed pathology; one should focus on strength and build on that. John believed that no matter what a child presented as his or her view of life it was unarguably correct because it derived directly from the child’s life experience and represented the conclusions the child had drawn. It might be wildly inappropriate to reality as others saw it, but it reflected the experience of the child and one must begin to work from that point. Most of the children in Warrendale came from broken homes, no homes, foster homes or other institutions. For many, Warrendale was their last chance before committal to hospital or juvenile detention.

One child in House Two had been placed at birth in an orphanage that believed that it was emotionally damaging for a child to be picked up for feeding. For the first two weeks of his life he was presented with a bottle stuck in the side of his crib, and rarely felt human contact at all. Another was regularly sat on a hot stove when he was thought to have misbehaved, and another was tied to her bed when she acted up or when her foster parents wanted to go out for the evening..

In John's view the essence of treatment was to accept where the child was at this point in life, and then provide him or her with the experience of living in a safe and emotionally nourishing environment. From gratifying life experiences the child could then reach new conclusions and could emotionally grow again, as it were, and develop behaviour more appropriate to normal everyday life. He thought this was best achieved in a family-like setting with caring staff acting as parents.

Therefore a key part of treatment was to allow children to regress to whatever level of maturity each aspect of their personality had reached and then assist them to rebuild in an emotionally healthful way from that point. John used the metaphor of a sieve, in which the sturdier parts of one's character could be held at their chronological age level, and the undernourished parts slip through to their emotional age and then be nourished until they had grown to the maturity appropriate to their actual age.

Furthermore, since management of feelings – i.e., self-management – was at the centre of the child's difficulty, it was imperative that the child be allowed as much freedom of expression as possible. Only when feelings were out in the open could they be explored, worked through and managed. Swearing, yelling, screaming and crying – any vocal expression whatever – were almost always acceptable; only when the children were out in the community were they not permitted. Injuring oneself or others or damaging property, however, was totally unacceptable no matter where the child was.

Keen attention was paid at bed and meal times to ensure that they were as conflict free as possible. “Imagine how difficult it is,” John would say, “for a child to surrender herself to sleep when it is so often filled with nightmares.” Great care and affection were shown to the children at bedtime. Calm, quiet and security were of the utmost importance.

In the management of children, precise distinctions were made between routines, limits and anchor points. What John called routines were events and behaviour that should be

relatively automatic and unarguable; they then became so. Limits were those actions that were unarguably unacceptable – like damage to oneself, others or property. Anchor points were an interesting concept: they were those actions which are arguable – like putting your elbow on the table at mealtime or taking it off when you are told to – which mothers and little boys may disagree about intensely. They don't affect the course of world history or anything else one whit. They are essential “ventilation” points, important for blowing off steam. And whoever has the most steam to blow off that day is ordinarily allowed to win. John used to say that marriages or families without anchor points were unlikely to endure. Games, some traditional, some developed by John and his staff, were often used for expression and exploration. Hide and seek, for example, gave children the delightful experience of being found, and “cheat,” a game invented by John, allowed them to play at cheating.

A critical matter, in an environment where emotional freedom is not only allowed but encouraged, is the management of behaviour. In many institutions at that time, and it may be the same today, when a child went “out of control” he or she would be restrained in a straitjacket, isolated in a “quiet room” or sedated with a pill. Quiet rooms were often lined with steel and bore the nail-marks of desperately angry children. Sedation simply knocked them out and blocked their feelings. John thought this an inhuman and damaging way of managing children.

Early on he discovered that simply by taking a child by the elbows, turning him or her around and pulling their arms across his chest, then sitting them down on one's lap and crossing one's legs over theirs, one could swiftly and easily immobilize the child. Struggle as they might, children so held could neither injure themselves nor others. And they were in touch with another, caring, person.

Holding was devised as a way of safely managing a child seized with rage, but it soon became something more. It was discovered that, after the rage was spent, memories would often surface in the child, memories that opened up the past and could be explored, if the child wished, for new and more useful interpretations of reality now as contrasted with reality then. Holding occurred more often in the film than was usual in treatment, because of the children's shock at Dorothy's death. Holding was also scary for new staff learning to do it and the first time they tried it was something of a rite of passage. Their anxiety around holding sometimes led to it being used less than perfectly – to their intense embarrassment, especially if they were being filmed. However, I never saw a child injured in the slightest.

A voracious reader in many fields, especially in the social sciences and literature, John was particularly honoured to be invited to screen Warrendale for the British Psychoanalytic Association. The screening was arranged by my protégé Roger Graef and the film was introduced by Donald Winnicott, the world-renowned dean of the field of child studies and development. Roger was a leading figure in my London studio in the mid-sixties. Our work there will be addressed in my accounts of other films in the Collection.

Parenthetically, it is worth describing an earlier screening of a rough cut of the film, moderated by Dr. Martin Fischer, Psychiatric Consultant to Warrendale. This was at an International Conference of Child Psychiatrists and Child Care Workers. We screened a three hour version and Martin did a question and answer session for about an hour afterward. The psychiatrists were enraged, especially by the “holding” sessions, and their questions reflected this.

After each explosion or question Martin would nod sagely and then nod again for the next question, as any good analyst would do. About twenty minutes into the string of tirades, there was an explosion from the childcare workers and nurses sitting, in equal numbers, behind the doctors. “What do you folks know? You see kids an hour a week! We work with them all day every day of the week and we have never seen anything before as amazing and helpful to us!” They explained why – holding was an especially useful notion, so were the routines around meals and bedtime, the rocking and affection expressed. Martin had hardly to say a word. It was almost as if he were working with the children, Carol and Tony, as he did in a scene in the film: letting them make the discoveries they needed to make for themselves; having earned them, they owned them.

It is also useful to note that when I screened the finished film for the children, while they were deeply moved, they did complain that it did not show as much of their good times as was typical of life in Warrendale. When we explained that this was because the film had necessarily focused on Dorothy's death and the important feelings that sad event had unleashed, this was accepted and they were proud of the film and their part in it; so was the staff.

There is much more to be written about the making of the film and its aftermath, but this may serve, for now, as an introduction

Allan King
Filmmaker

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